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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences between maltreated and non-maltreated children in their perception of parental figures and explored differential perceptions of maternal and paternal figures. Using the Test for Detection of Parental Violence (TDPV), 22 maltreated 4- to 7-year-olds referred by Youth Protection Services were compared to 22 non-maltreated children recruited from preschools and kindergartens. The two groups were matched on age, gender, family income, employment status of parents, and family structure. The TDPV used six maternal pictures and four paternal pictures to elicit stories from the child interpreting situations in which the parental figure and a child interact. Children's stories were audiotaped, transcribed, and blind-scored, yielding scores for Parental Positive Behaviors and Parental Negative Behaviors for both mothers and fathers. Results indicated that maltreated children had a more negative perception of their parents than did non-maltreated children. Both groups showed different perceptions of maternal and paternal figures. Mother figure cards elicited more answers than father figure cards. The maltreated group perceived their parents as more aggressive, punitive, neglecting, and controlling than did non-maltreated children. Maltreated children saw their mother as more neglecting than their father. Non-maltreated children viewed their parents as having more positive affects and providing more explanations and saw their fathers as providing more caregiving than did maltreated children. (KDFB)

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Children's representation of parental figures in young physically abused and non-maltreated children.

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Résumé

Quelques études ont été effectuées sur la perception que les parents maltraitants ont de leur enfant (Bugental et al, 1989; Reid et al, 1987) mais peu de recherches concernent la perception que les enfants maltraités ont de leurs parents. Cette recherche vise à vérifier si la perception des enfants maltraités à l'égard de leurs parents diffère de celle des enfants non-maltraités et à explorer les différences entre les perceptions des figures maternelle et paternelle chez ces enfants. A l'aide du Test de dépistage de la violence parentale (TDVP, Palacio-Quintin, 1991, 1992) un échantillon de 44 enfants (22 maltraités et 22 non-maltraités) a été étudié. Les résultats indiquent que les enfants maltraités ont une perception plus négative des figures parentales et qu'il existe des différences entre les perceptions des figures maternelle et paternelle chez les maltraités et non-maltraités.

Summary

Several studies have been conducted on parent's perceptions of their child in maltreating families (Bugental et al, 1989; Reid et al, 1987) but few studies have adressed the question of children's perception of their maltreating parents. The goals of this study are: 1) to verify if there are differences between maltreated and non-maltreated children in their perception of parental figures; 2) to explore differential perceptions of maternal and paternal figures. Using the Test for Detection of Parental Violence (TDPV, Palacio-Quintin, 1991, 1992), 22 maltreated children were compared to 22 non-maltreated children. Results show that maltreated children have a more negative perception of their parents and that both maltreated and non-maltreated show different perceptions of maternal and paternal figures.

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THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND PROBLEM

Knowledge about child maltreatment has grown up greatly in the last years. Large descriptions of the phenomena from the medical, psychological and psycho-social points of view are now available. All this knowledge is issued from the observer's point of view.

Some studies have described parent's perceptions of their child in maltreating families (Bugental *et al.*, 1989; Lacharité, 1992, Palacio-Quintin *et al.*, 1995; Reid *et al.*, 1987) and have shown that maltreating mothers see their children as having more behavioral problems than non-maltreating mothers do.

But investigators in the area of child abuse have neglected to study the child's perceptions of parental behavior. Two studies have explored some aspects. Herberger, Potts & Dillon (1981) have made structured interviews with 24 children aged 8 to 14 years living in a group home. They found that those that had been maltreated described their mother and father in more negative terms, as being more emotionally neglecting and frightening, than those that have not been maltreated. But maltreatment was not objectively documented in this research, it was derived from the children's reports. Caufriez & Fryman (1986) analyzing CAT from 20 maltreated children observed that these children perceived parental figures as aggressive and felt fear of lost.

So, we know little about how the maltreating situation is experienced by the child and how the child perceives the parental behavior and feelings. As children often interpret events differently than adults, direct knowledge of children's perception of parental behavior is essential.

GOALS

The goals of this study are:

1) To verify if there are differences between physically abused and non-maltreated preschool children in their perception of parental figures regarding parental behavior and feelings when interacting with the child.
2) To explore differential perceptions of mothers and fathers figures of those children
3) To gain knowledge about the abusing situation through children's indirect expression

METHOD

Subjects were 44, 4 to 7 years old children. Physically abused children (n=22) have been referred by our local Youth Protection Services. Non-Maltreated (N-M) children (n=22) have been recruited in preschools and kindergarten of the same area and were matched with abused children on age, gender, family income, employment status of parents and family structure. Demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Children perception of parental behavior and feelings was evaluated with the Test for Detection of Parental Violence (TDPV) (Palacio-Quintin; 1992). Using a story-telling technique, the TDPV leads the child to interpret situations in which a parental figure and a child interact. The test is composed of 10 cards representing scenes of daily home life. Six of these cards illustrates a maternal figure and four a paternal figure.

Child's stories were audio-taped and transcribed. The answers to each card were blind-scored using a criteria based strategy. Categories of answer concerning Parental behaviors and feelings are reported in Table 2. The scoring procedure yields scores for Parental Positive Behaviors (P+) and Parental Negative Behaviors (P-). Given that they are 6 Mother and 4 Father figure cards, averaged scores by card were used in the analyses comparing the responses to these two sets of cards.

Table 1. Demographic information

		Abused	Non-maltreated
		N= 22	N=22
Child's age (in months)		63,5	60,7
Child's gender	male	12	13
	female	10	9
Occupational status[1]	unemployed	14	10
	.39 and less	4	6
	.40 à .49	4	6
Family annual income ($ CAN)			
	less than 15 000$	15	16
	15 000$ to 24 000 $	6	5
	more than 24 000$	1	1

1 Blishen and McRoberts (1976) index for the Canadian population. Index under .39 correspond to general definition of low class.

Table 2. Classification of behavior and feelings of parental figures

Parental negative behavior (P-)	
- Aggression	mild verbal aggression , acute verbal aggression, acting-out, mild physical aggression, acute physical aggression.
- Punitive techniques	the parent withholds privileges, withholds food, isolates, slaps, beats.
- Negative feelings	the parent scolds, gets angry, threatens, damages child's self-esteem, rejects child.
- Avoidance and neglect	the parent gives up on child, ignores child's conversation or request, does not accept expression of child's feelings, ignores its basic needs.
- Control techniques	the parent gives unexplained orders, forbids, gives unjustified orders, behaves in arbitrary or incoherent fashion, behaves strangely.
- Other negative feelings or behaviors	
Parental positive behavior (P+)	
- Positive affects	the parent approves, praises, shows affection, comforts, rewards, gets interested in child's behavior or feelings, gives emotional support
- Explanation	the parent makes demands, explains the orders, explains displeasure
- Care giving	the parent takes care, feeds, tells a story, protects
- Other positive	is glad or happy, accepts

RESULTS

Abused children obtained higher scores on the P- scale ($F=7,72$; $p<01$) and lower scores on the P+ scale ($F=8,53$; $p<.01$) (See Table 3). Furthermore, Mother figure cards elicited more answers than the Father's one in both groups, differences between sets of cards appearing on P+ ($F=8,03$; $p<.01$) and P- ($F=6,16$; $p<.05$) as well.

Analyses of the P- sub-categories (see Table 4) indicate that the Abused group obtained significant higher scores on "Aggression" ($U=176$; $p<.05$), "Punitive techniques" ($U=173$; $p<.05$), "Avoidance & neglect" ($U=97,5$; $p<.001$) and "Control techniques" ($U=166$; $p<.01$). For these first three sub-categories, differences came mainly from the answers given to the Mother figure cards while the difference on "Control Techniques" seems to be mainly due to the responses given to the Father figure cards. In addition, Abused children produced more answers to Mother than to Father figure cards on the "Avoidance & neglect" sub-category ($Z=2,63$; $p<.01$), while this difference is not observed in the N-M group. Conversely, N-M children proportionally gave more answers of "Control techniques" sub-category on Mother than on Father figure cards sets ($Z=2,1$; $p<.05$).

Concerning P+ behaviors, N-M children produced more responses of "Positive affect" ($U=135$; $p<.01$) and "Explanation" ($U=121$; $p<.01$) sub-categories. For "Positive affect", groups differ on both Mother and Father figures cards. In addition, Mother figure cards elicited more responses of this type in both groups than did the Father figure cards (Ab. $Z=2,02$; $p<.05$ / N-M. $Z= 2,60$; $p<.01$). Finally, we observe that N-M children gave more responses of "Care giving" on Father figure cards than did the Abused children ($U=171$; $p<.05$).

Table 3- **Results obtained by Abused and Non-Maltreated children on TDPV's Parental Behavior scales and averaged scores by card for paternal and maternal figures sets.**

	Abused (n=22) m (s)	Non-Maltreated (n=22) m (s)	Effects		
			Group F	Figure F	Group by Figure F
Parental negative behavior (P-)					
Total scale score	36,77 (22,8)	21,27 (12,7)	7,72**		
Father figure cards	3,18 (2,3)	1,80 (1,2)	6,15*		
Mother figure cards	3,80 (2,4)	2,34 (1,5)	5,62*	6,16*	0,04
Parental positive behavior (P+)					
Total scale score	3,18 (3,1)	6,50 (4,3)	8,53**		
Father figure cards	0,22 (0,2)	0,53 (0,5)	8,01**		
Mother figure cards	0,38 (0,4)	0,71 (0,5)	5,62*	8,03**	0,0

* p<.05 **p<.01

Table 4- **Mean scores obtained for sub-categories of Parental Negative Behavior scale and averaged scores by card for paternal and maternal figures sets.**

		Abused (n=22) m	Non-Maltreated (n=22) m	Group U	Effects Figure Abused Z	Non-Malt. Z
Parental negative behavior (P-)						
1- Aggression	Total	3,13	0,91	176*		
	Father	0,32	0,16	211		
	Mother	0,30	0,04	165**	0,35	1,21
2- Punitive techniques	Total	10,23	6,32	173*		
	Father	0,98	0,66	203		
	Mother	0,99	0,61	176*	0,20	0,00
3- Negative feelings	Total	6,90	6,90	222		
	Father	0,82	0,45	237		
	Mother	0,84	0,57	210	0,30	1,49
4 - Avoidance & neglect	Total	5,09	0,82	97,5***		
	Father	0,25	0,04	204		
	Mother	0,68	0,10	106***	2,63**	1,09
5- Control techniques	Total	11,00	5,82	166*		
	Father	0,77	0,43	160*		
	Mother	1,21	0,68	194	1,33	2,1*
6- Other negative behavior/feelings	Total	0,41	0,50	229		
	Father	0,03	0,05	229		
	Mother	0,04	0,04	234	0,28	0,52

* p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001 U=Mann-Whitney Z= Wilcoxon signed ranks test

Table 5- **Mean scores obtained for sub-categories of Parental Positive Behavior scale and averaged scores by card for paternal and maternal figures sets.**

		Abused (n=22) m	Non-Maltreated (n=22) m	Group U	Effects Figure Abused Z	Non-Malt. Z
Parental Positive behavior (P+)						
7-Positive affect	Total	0,32	1,09	135**		
	Father	0,00	0,05	198*		
	Mother	0,05	0,15	149**	2,02*	2,60**
8- Explanation	Total	1,54	2,81	121**		
	Father	0,12	0,25	181		
	Mother	0,18	0,30	159*	0,72	0,50
9- Care giving	Total	0,77	1,45	188		
	Father	0,06	0,15	171*		
	Mother	0,09	0,13	220	0,77	0,52
10-Other positive behavior/feelings	Total	0,55	1,13	187		
	Father	0,04	0,09	227		
	Mother	0,06	0,13	187	0,49	0,78

* p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001 U=Mann-Whitney Z= Wilcoxon signed ranks test

DISCUSSION

Abused children show more negative and less positive perception of their parent's behavior and feelings than non-maltreated children do. They describe their parents in more negative terms, see them as more aggressive, punitive, controlling and neglectful. They also see their parents as showing fewer positive affects and care giving. Both mothers and fathers are seen this way. But abused children perceive the Mother figure as more neglecting than the Father's one, while Father figure is seen as expressing less positive affects. Both abused and non-maltreated children perceive the Mother's figure as interacting more with them than the Father's figure.

All these perceptions that have been *expressed indirectly* are well related with reality. We can conclude that descriptions of parents' interactions with their child made by children through projective techniques can allow us to know better abusing situations.